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2020 survey of the 2017 cohort of young people leaving education

Is the health crisis enough to explain their desire for a career change?

Three years into their working lives, the young people of the 2017 cohort of leavers from education and training saw the early stages of their careers thrown into confusion. Questioned several months afterwards, one third of them stated that the crisis had led them to rethink their career plans. Was it really a decisive factor in this desire for change? How had lockdown changed these young people's situation and working and employment conditions and to what extent had they been affected by short-time working and shutdowns? The *Génération* survey provides the beginnings of an answer to these questions.



Youth employment
Health crisis
Pathway to integration
Lifelong guidance
Youth unemployment
Generation survey

The unexpected arrival of the pandemic at the beginning of 2020 led to the French population being locked down from mid-March to mid-May 2020. In sectors dealing directly with the public, work was allowed to go on, sometimes even more intensively than before, when the activity in question was judged to be “essential” to keeping the country functioning. When this was not the case, companies were obliged to pull down the shutters. And regardless of sector, all activities not requiring an on-site presence had to shift to teleworking. In order to lessen the shock for businesses, the government introduced certain measures, most notably an unprecedented expansion of the short-time working scheme. Did these measures serve their intended purpose as shock absorbers and help to safeguard jobs? How were working conditions affected by the lockdown? To what extent did the advent of the crisis disrupt the career paths of the young people in the 2017 cohort, who had left initial education and training during the academic year 2016 - 2017 (cf. Methodology box 1).

This first lockdown gave rise to an unprecedented suspension of the normal patterns of time use and to the hypothesis, widely echoed in the media, that it had led many to question their attitudes to work and, in turn, to a heightening of their desire for a career change. And indeed, a few months after the lockdown, 35% of the young people in the 2017 cohort stated that the health crisis had led them to rethink their career plans. Almost half of the respondents replied before the second lockdown, the others during it or afterwards, but the exact time at which they replied did not seem to influence their

responses. Several factors might have influenced this questioning: the lived experience of the first lockdown, as well as individual characteristics unrelated to the health crisis.

Lockdown has a fairly limited impact on young people's employment situation

At the time when the health crisis erupted in France, 72% of young people in the 2017 cohort were in employment, 16% were looking for work, 4% were in training or had returned to education and 8% were in another situation. The first lockdown led to a decline of 2.8 percentage points in the 2017 cohort's employment rate [1]. Thus the measures taken to safeguard jobs succeeded in limiting the effects of the lockdown, but they did not protect everybody in the same way. The young people who benefited least from this safety net were those who were on fixed-term contracts, doing agency work or in subsidised jobs* when the lockdown began: they were more exposed to the “freezing” of the labour market, and particularly to the non-renewal of short-term contracts. Nevertheless, the worst of the shock was softened by the summer bounce back. Thus 92% of the individuals in employment in March 2020 were still in employment in September. This average rate conceals differences linked to the type of contract held in March: 16 to 17% of those doing temporary agency work or employed in subsidised jobs were no longer in employment six months later, while 94% to 97% of those in permanent jobs (self-employed, open-ended contracts, civil servants) were still in work. However, these differences are

1 Methodology box

The *Génération 2017* survey is representative at the national level of the 746,000 individuals who left initial education for the first time during or at the end of the academic year 2016-2017, regardless of the level of qualification obtained. More than 25,000 young people were surveyed between September 2020 and March 2021 about their educational trajectories and the first three years of their working lives with the aid of a calendar that mapped, month by month, their activities during the period in question.

Taking advantage of the delay in data collection enforced by the first lockdown between March and May 2020, Céreq added a “Covid” module to the questionnaire in order to investigate the impact of the health crisis. It focuses more specifically on the effects of this first lockdown on young people’s trajectories. Specific questions were put to them depending on their employment situation in March 2020 (in work, looking for work, in training or returned to education, other situation) in order to understand how this crisis disrupted their working conditions and/or their current and future plans.

The *Génération* surveys are part of the French official statistical system. For further details:

<https://www.cereq.fr/enquetes-et-donnees/insertion-professionnelle-generation>

in no way specific to the crisis, since they could be observed before the lockdown.

Of those individuals who remained in employment between March and September 2020, 7% were no longer in the same job. The main reasons for leaving that were given were resignations (45% of cases) and fixed-term jobs coming to an end (39% of cases). The non-renewal of contracts may in part have been linked to the crisis, as mentioned above. The resignations, for their part, have little to do with the context: although the health crisis did indeed lead to an unprecedented number of resignations in France and elsewhere, this phenomenon can be observed mainly from 2021 onwards. It did not become evident immediately after the first lockdown [2].

A highly variable shut-down depending on sector ...

Although the lockdown did not give rise to any massive changes in employment situations, these unprecedented circumstances certainly did disrupt individuals’ plans and activities. Those who remained in employment often saw major changes in the way they worked. Thus among the young people in the 2017 cohort who were in work when the lockdown began, 27% had to stop working while keeping their jobs. Sectors linked to leisure activities and tourism and non-essential businesses dealing with the public were the most severely affected: 61% of the young people in the 2017 cohort who were working in the hotel and catering industry stopped working. These interruptions affected 49% of the young people in the arts, entertainment and recreational activities sector, 47% of those in non-essential businesses ** and 44% of those in automotive retail and repairs. In contrast, in essential businesses **, only 17% of the young people stopped working; the figure in the essential healthcare occupations was just 5%.

Besides the enforced closure of businesses dealing with the public judged to be non-essential, companies also suffered losses of outlets and shortages of raw materials because of the sharp contraction in international trade, which seriously disrupted the global value chain. These disruptions, together with the need to comply with social distancing rules, led some sectors not dealing with the public to reduce their activity. In the chemical and pharmaceutical industry, for example, for example, 8% of the young people in the 2017 cohort stopped working, as did 19% in the agro-food industries and 27% in the other industries. In the construction industry, the figure was 36%.

... except for managerial and executive staff (*cadres*), who moved to teleworking

Regardless of how activity in their sector evolved, managerial and executive staff (*cadres*) seldom stopped working. Only 10% of the young *cadres* in the 2017 cohort stopped working during the first lockdown, compared with 25% of those in intermediate occupations, 34% of blue-collar workers and 36% of white-collar workers. The most precarious workers were also disadvantaged by their employment status. One third of temporary agency workers stopped working while retaining their contracts, as did 40% of the young people on subsidised contracts and 42% of the solo self-employed (the so-called “auto-entrepreneurs”). In contrast, only 8% of tenured civil servants said they had stopped working during the first lockdown, as did 16% of public-sector contract staff in permanent jobs.

The pandemic gave rise to a very considerable expansion of teleworking, which concerned 48% of the young people in the 2017 cohort who had worked during the first lockdown. Of them, 58% were doing teleworking for the first time and 31% more than previously. Their situations were highly variable depending on socio-occupational category. 88% of the young *cadres* who had worked during the first lockdown were involved in teleworking; the figure for those in intermediate occupations was 57% and 26% for white-collar workers. Blue-collar workers were almost completely unaffected by teleworking.

44% of the young people in the 2017 cohort employed in the private sector put on to short-time working

In order to avoid closures and mass redundancies, the state put in place several support measures, such as guaranteed loans with deferred repayment, in order to ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises, the liberal professions, craft workers and shopkeepers and voluntary associations had sufficient cash flow. Payment of tax and social security contributions was also deferred, compensation was paid for loss of sales and a solidarity fund for those sectors affected by enforced closures was established.

Short-time working was also adapted and used on a massive scale, with the vast bulk of the payroll burden being transferred to the state in exchange for guarantees that jobs would be protected. 39% of the young people in the 2017 cohort were put on to short-time working; the figure rises to 44% if only private-sector employees are taken into account. Those who had to stop working during the first lockdown were obviously the most seriously affected, followed by those who said they had worked less, 67% and 50% of them respectively. Of those who said they had worked the same amount, 17% were put on to short-time working.

Self-evidently, those sectors in which employees were most seriously affected by complete shutdowns made the greatest use of this arrangement. Thus 80% of the 2017 cohort working in the hotel and catering industry were put on short-time working. Conversely, this applied to only 8% in the health sector and 18% of those working in essential business occupations. In the private sector, all the socio-occupational categories were affected: one third of the young *cadres* were put on short-time working, as were almost half of those in the intermediate occupations and blue- and white-collar workers.

Short-time working led to a reduction in income for a quarter of the young people in the 2017 cohort. More specifically, 47% of those put on short-time said their income declined during the first lockdown, compared with 12% of the others. The solo self-employed and other non-wage workers were the most badly affected categories, with 66% and 43% of them respectively suffering a loss of income, while tenured civil servants and public-sector contract staff were, for the most part, spared any reductions, as were those in essential occupations. Blue- and white-collar workers were more affected than *cadres*. Conversely, few of the young people reported an increase in income. In the essential occupations in healthcare and business, where this situation was more frequent, the shares were 15% and 12% respectively. Of those who said they had worked more during the lockdown, only 14% reported that they had earned more.

Job searches and training thwarted

Even the young people who were not in employment during the first lockdown suffered its consequences. Among those in the 2017 cohort who were looking for work when the lockdown started, 12% stated that they had just found a job, 8% that they were going to attend an interview and 7% that they had some good leads. In reality, it is difficult to differentiate precisely between those who were deprived of opportunities because they were unable to pursue their job searches or applications in the normal way and those who lost out because the uncertain situation led businesses to put their recruitment plans on hold, even after the lockdown. However, this feeling of lost opportunity must be taken into account in order to examine the possible factors driving the

2 Share of young people who said they had rethought their career plans because of the health crisis

By labour market situation and employment status in March 2020	
Looking for work	47%
Training or return to education	32%
Solo self-employed	44%
Public-sector contract staff in permanent jobs	34%
Other non-wage workers	35%
Other fixed-term jobs	34%
Temporary employment agency workers	33%
Other fixed-term jobs	32%
Subsidised contracts	27%
Public-sector contract staff on fixed-term contracts	25%
Tenured civil servant	14%
By change in situation between March and September 2020*	
Moved from employment to looking for work	55%
Remained looking for work	50%
Moved from looking for work to employment	41%
Remained inactive	36%
Changed jobs	34%
Stayed in the same job	29%
Stayed in training or returned to education	27%
By changes in work during lockdown for young people in employment in March 2020	
Did not work during the lockdown	39%
Worked more	32%
Worked less	34%
Worked as much	23%
By extent of continuity of training during lockdown for the young people concerned in March 2020	
No interruption	28%
Suspension then return	31%
Interruption	55%
By job search situation during lockdown for the young people concerned in March 2020	
Was not on the point of finding work	44%
Was on the point of finding work	56%

Source: Céreq, Génération 2017.

Scope: the entire 2017 cohort

* Only: the commonest situations were recorded.



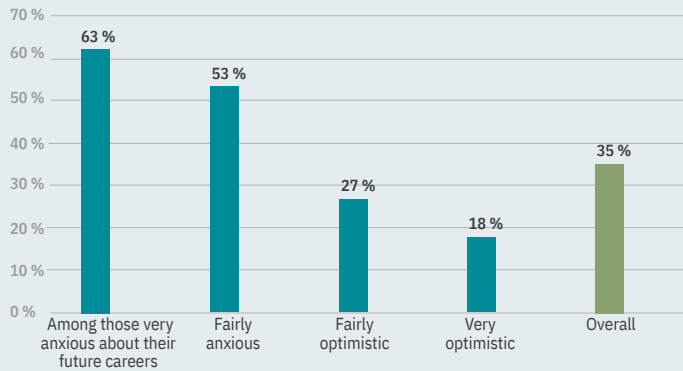
desire for a career change. The same applies to those young people who were in training or had returned to education in March 2020 and had to interrupt their courses, whether temporarily (12% of those affected) or permanently (14%). There are significant differences depending on the nature of the education or training, since the interruption was permanent in only 4% of cases when the course in question was leading to a national education or other state qualification, compared with 25% for other types of course (vocational qualification, sectoral qualification, licence to practice, etc.).

Anxiety about the future and desire to change career often go hand in hand

A little more than one third of the young people in the 2017 cohort stated that the health crisis had led them to rethink their career plans. The differences by level of education are overall very slight. Thus, for example, 37% of those with lower secondary qualifications only, 30% of those with a vocational degree and 38% of graduates of an elite business or engineering school were rethinking their plans. The labour force status just before lockdown and employment status play a much greater role. In particular, those young people who were looking for work or were solo self-employed

3

Proportion of young people declaring that the health crisis had led them to rethink their career plans depending on their degree of anxiety about their future careers



Source: Céreq, Génération 2017 survey, provisional data.

Scope: young people who left initial education during or at the end of the 2016/17 academic year.



Learn more

- [1] « [Enquête 2020 auprès de la Génération 2017. Des Parcours contrastés, une Génération mieux insérée, jusqu'à...](#) », T. Couppié, E. Gaubert, E. Personnaz, *Céreq Bref*, n°422, mai 2022, 8 p.
- [2] « [Les embauches et les fins de contrat continuent de progresser au 2e trimestre 2021](#) », V. Barry, *DARES Indicateurs*, n°61, nov. 2021, 7 p.
- [3] « [L'optimisme : une analyse synthétique](#) », C. Martin-Krumm, *Les Cahiers Internationaux de Psychologie Sociale*, Presses universitaires de Liège, 2012/1, n°93, pp. 103-133.
- [4] « [Se reconvertir, c'est du boulot ! Enquête sur les travailleurs non qualifiés](#) », C. Stéphanus, J. Véro, *Céreq Bref*, n°418, février 2022, 4 p.
- [5] « [Quels travailleurs-clés lors de la première vague de Covid-19](#) », M. Telle-Lamberton, N. Bouscaren, *Focus. Santé en Ile-de-France*, Observatoire de la santé en Ile-de-France, décembre 2020, 24 p.

were much more likely to declare that they had thought of changing direction (47% and 44% respectively), compared with 32% of those in work and only 14% of young civil servants. Differences can also be observed depending on how the first lockdown went. Among the young people in employment who had been unable to work during that period, 39 % stated they had considered a change of direction, compared with 23% of those who had worked as much as previously. The young people in training in March 2020 were more likely to express a desire for change when their course was ended for good by the lockdown (55% vs. 31% when the interruption was temporary and 28% when there was no interruption). Among those looking for work in March 2020, those who said they were on the point of finding a job before the lockdown were also more likely than the others to say they had reconsidered their career plans (56% and 44% respectively). Thus the lockdown was more likely to have caused young people to rethink their career plans if it had disrupted the initial labour market situation.

Standard modelling was used in an attempt to separate out these various factors likely to have played a role in determining young people's propensity to state they had rethought their career plans because of the health crisis. It confirms the effect of the experience of lockdown. Those whose plans were thwarted or who experienced a deterioration in their situations compared with their circumstances pre-crisis - but whose other characteristics were identical in respect of the other analytical factors used - were more likely than the others to have thought about a change of direction because of the crisis. Having suffered a reduction in income also tended to encourage this rethink. On the other hand, even controlling for employment

status and sector, the young people employed in essential occupations - sometimes termed "front-line" occupations - were slightly less likely to want a career change. Moreover, the date of the survey does not seem to be really decisive, any more than the level of qualification. Although qualificational level obviously determined the trajectories taken on entering the labour market, it was their labour market situation when the lockdown started that influenced their propensity to consider a change of direction. Incidentally, the type of trajectory taken during the first few years of the working life played only a marginal role. The variable that seems to be by far the one most closely linked to the desire for change is the degree of anxiety about the future career. Among the young people who said they were very anxious about the future, 63% said they had rethought their career plans. The figure for those who said they were anxious is 53%, but only 25% for those who described themselves as not concerned. This strong link is observed at all levels of education and appears to be clearly significant given comparable characteristics.

The role of anxiety in influencing the propensity to report a rethink of career plans is all the more deserving of being highlighted since the average degree of anxiety among the 2017 cohort has not risen very significantly following the health crisis. From a methodological point of view, the modelling undertaken does not enable us to conclude that there is a causal link between the degree of anxiety and the desire for a change of direction. It simply shows that the two tendencies go hand in hand with each other.

●— The fact that the young people who are most inclined to rethink their career plans are the ones who are least optimistic about their future careers and those looking for work leads us to think that this is a defensive strategy. These results may call into question these young people's ability to realise their stated desire for a change of career, given that studies in social psychology have shown that success and optimism are generally linked [3]. Other studies have also shown that access to the public measures that can be brought into play in support of such desires for a change of direction is subject to certain social determinants and that the contexts from which these desires emerge are not without influence on the chances of success [4]. Are the young people in the 2017 cohort who stated that they wanted to change direction because of the health crisis going to manage to find the resources required to change course? The answers will come in 2023, when this cohort will be questioned again. ●

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